The Arroyo government has once again shown negligence in its duty to protect Filipino lives abroad with its irresolute handling of the evacuation of OFWs in the recent war in Lebanon.

The war in Lebanon exacted its toll on the more than 30,000 OFWs who live and work in that country. The heavy toll came not only with the mortal danger these OFWs faced while Israeli bombs dropped all over, but also with the ordeal of fending for themselves while Philippine government officials bickered over the absence of repatriation funds.

At the onset of the 34-day war, the country’s Labor undersecretary made an absurd assertion that “most Filipinos in Lebanon were safe because they worked for Christian families and lived in Christian areas.” That assertion came with an even more absurd set of advice from the DFA: “Seek refuge in churches. Hitch a ride with passing vehicles. Pack up and go.”

Only on the ninth day of the war did the first group of 192 OFWs travel from Beirut to Damascus, Syria.

The censure from migrant advocates and ordinary citizens finally pushed President Arroyo to order the repatriation of OFWs and form Task Force Lebanon to deal with the problem. The order came three
weeks into the conflict, after OFWs “felt the earth shake as bombs exploded near their place of work, saw billows of smoke from targeted areas in Southern Lebanon, and heard the drone of Israeli war planes.”

Despite its slow response, the Arroyo government managed to bring home about 5,600 OFWs by the time a UN-brokered truce took effect. (This number has further gone up to 6,287 as of October 13.)

Half the credit, however, should be given to the International Organization for Migrants (IOM), which helped the Philippine government in getting trapped OFWs out of Lebanon. The IOM, which maintains an office in Manila, has repatriated 3,450 at no expense to the Philippine government, or almost half of the total number of repatriated OFWs. Credit should also go to the repatriated OFWs who, because of their discipline, allowed the evacuation to proceed smoothly.

The Lebanon war caused the death of 1,250 people and wounded 3,508, mostly civilians. It also destroyed or damaged 29 vital installations, 6,950 homes, 160 business establishments, 600 kilometers of roads, 73 fuel stations, 73 bridges, and 72 overpasses.

Two Filipinos died at the height of the conflict. One accidentally fell from the balcony of the flat she was cleaning. The other fatality also fell down while trying to escape her employer who would not allow her to be evacuated. Twenty-nine (29) other OFWs suffered injuries as they fled Lebanon. Most of the wounded had leg and foot injuries, sustained while trying to escape.

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The Lebanon war was only one in the long string of Arab-Israeli battles. Israeli soldiers have time and again crossed into Lebanon to kill guerrillas and totally destroy Hezbollah. But in its most recent attempt, it failed in its mission and instead harmed innocent civilians and destroyed property.

Hezbollah, meanwhile, has remained largely intact and has kept its ability to inflict harm on Israel. Created precisely to destroy Israel and fight a proxy war for its Iranian and Syrian patrons, Hezbollah will never cease attacking Israel until it has fulfilled its goal.

On the other hand, Israel’s desire to destroy Hezbollah and the US threats against Iran may trigger a ‘global wave of suicide bombings that would create widespread insecurity.’ It will only take some time before another war erupts in that part of the globe. The possibilities are many. The next conflict may engulf the whole of Lebanon. It may draw in Iran and Syria. It may involve the whole Arab world against Israel.

The next war may force the Philippine government to grapple not only with evacuating 30,000 OFWs in Lebanon and another 30,000 in Israel; it may have to worry about the safety and evacuation of the 1.5 million OFWs in the whole Middle East.

A long-term solution to the problem of OFWs being caught in wars in other countries lies in a genuine national development that can offer Filipino workers decent jobs here in the country.

In the meantime, the Philippine government must face up to its primary task of protecting at all costs these OFWs, whom it has deployed in large numbers over the last three decades. The government must always have a contingency plan ready in case war breaks out in places where OFWs are concentrated. Or in case of probable war, it should immediately ban the deployment of OFWs.

On the ground level, it should start forging agreements with Philippine and foreign airlines and ship owners to have them use their air and sea craft to help evacuate Filipinos in case of war. It should pinpoint evacuation points in advance, so that the government does not panic at the last moment, running around trying to find shelter for Filipinos fleeing from war.

Upon repatriation, the government should also make money available to tide these OFWs over after losing their jobs abroad and experiencing the horrors of war. It must also start finding decent jobs for these evacuees.

Most importantly, the government must get its act together in times of crisis as what happened in Lebanon, if only to repay these OFWs whose billion-dollar remittances have helped this same government to survive.

In cases where help from their own government is not forthcoming, OFWs can still have recourse to international instruments laid down to address conflicts such as the Lebanon war. Just like the citizens of their host government involved in a major conflict, OFWs are similarly entitled to the protection laid down by the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, which states that “Persons taking no active part in the hostilities … shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria.”

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